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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TUNIS 001199

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/MAG (WILLIAMS, NARDI, PATTERSON), NEA/PPD
(DOUGLAS, AGNES, JAZYNSKA), DRL (JOHNSTONE, KLARMAN); LONDON
FOR RMH (SREEBNEY); DUBAI FOR RMH (PELLETIER)

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TAGS: [ECPS](#) [KPAO](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PREF](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: GOT SEEKS TO "STRANGLE" PRIVATE TV STATION

REF: TUNIS 795

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Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: In a meeting with the Ambassador, the owner and director general of Tunisia's only private TV channel recounted several examples of GOT efforts to "strangle" his business. He sought to strengthen his ties to the Embassy and Ambassador to try to shield the station from further GOT interference. End summary.

¶2. (C) In response to an urgent request from Mohamed Larbi Nasra (protect), the Ambassador agreed to a December 2 private meeting with the Tunisian media magnate. Nasra, owner and director general of Tunisia's only private terrestrial and satellite television channel, Hannibal TV, has long been regarded as an insider with close ties to the Tunisian Presidency. Nonetheless, he had spoken frankly about GOT censorship and pressure (reftel) in a July 16 courtesy call to Hannibal TV by the Ambassador. He was even more forthcoming in the latest meeting, clearly stating that GOT interference has reached a point where the future of Hannibal TV is uncertain and repeatedly characterizing the GOT actions as efforts to "strangle" the station.

¶3. (C) According to Nasra, as a result of GOT pressure, advertising revenues at the station--over US \$11 million for the first six months of 2008--have dropped to just US \$350,000 to date for the second half of the year. Such low levels of advertising cannot sustain the station's substantial investments in studios and equipment and over 300 full-time employees.

¶4. (C) Nasra attributed much of the blame to Minister of Communications Rafaa Dekhil, stating that his relationship with Dekhil has deteriorated to such a degree that they no longer converse; Dekhil just chastises him and issues orders. Nasra said that at one point he asked the Minister to put his orders in writing. Dekhil, however, has refused to do so. One area of continued dispute is Nasra's claim that his license to operate specifically allows him to broadcast general news flashes, while Dekhil insists that any news coverage is prohibited. Except for sports and entertainment programming, Hannibal TV currently broadcasts no news programming, so the only source of local TV news is state-run Tunis 7. Nasra, emphasizing his belief in freedom of expression, said firmly that he would not bow to pressure from the Minister.

¶5. (C) The Ambassador's July visit to Hannibal TV was one incident that sparked Dekhil's and the GOT's ire. Following the broadcast of a few snippets of the July courtesy call

along with a 50-minute documentary on young American musicians (supplied by post via the IIP Office of Video Acquisitions), Nasra received a call from Dekhil, who stated that that Nasra "had no right" to receive the American ambassador or broadcast any part of his visit without authorization. At the December 2 meeting, Nasra also presented the Ambassador with a DVD of the Embassy's November 4-5 American election night events, at which Hannibal TV was the only broadcast media in attendance. The program has not been broadcast, and he has been told by the authorities that he is forbidden from doing so.

16. (C) Another example cited by Nasra was the station's special program on the November 7 21st anniversary of the Ben Ali regime, which he said was very complimentary, but from which the station had been forced to cut interviews, also complimentary, with leaders from parties other than the ruling RCD, even loyal (pro-Ben Ali) opposition parties.

17. (C) Not for the first time, Nasra stated that a group of investors had come to his office a few days ago, unsolicited, to discuss purchasing the station. He indicated that he had no interest in selling, regardless of price, and he would "shut and lock the doors" rather than sell. Nasra said he had sought a meeting with President Ben Ali on the increasing GOT pressure, but he has received no reply as yet. In light of all these factors, Nasra asked for the Ambassador's help in the form of "a clear indication that you are my friend." According to him, the authorities "fear the Americans" and such ties may help shield his business from further pressure. He even asked, only half in jest, if he could emigrate to the United States where he would be free to express his views.

18. (C) Comment: Local media research firms regularly report Hannibal TV as equaling or bettering state-run Tunis 7 in

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audience penetration; in fact, Hannibal TV is often the most-watched station in the country. Indirect GOT pressure via advertisers is consistent with similar GOT tactics used against newspapers and magazines that step out of line. The specific examples cited by Nasra also point to the ongoing GOT crackdown, not only on dissent, but on any independent expression or association with foreign institutions not under GOT control. Those who deal with the U.S. Embassy come in for particular rebuke. Once again, GOT rhetoric strongly contrasts with the reality on the ground as the space for debate remains very small in the tightly-controlled Tunisian media landscape. End comment.
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